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Literacy Enhancement and Writing across the Curriculum: A Motivational Addendum


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Literacy Enhancement and Writing across the Curriculum: A Motivational Addendum

Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Michael Flanagan, Department of English, University of Oklahoma, was a recipient of a Ford Foundation Literacy Grant on which the co-authors had an opportunity to work. We appreciated that opportunity during 1988-1989 and wish to express our appreciation for his successful enlistment of us into the cause of increased student literacy.

Literacy Enhancement and Writing across the Curriculum: A Motivational Addendum*

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The purpose of this brief paper is to supplement the preceding article with complementary information drawn from a Ford Foundation Literacy project and the national writing across the curriculum "movement." In their article Jensen and McQueeney provided a rationale for using written assignments in the basic communication skills course, identified some informal writing-to-learn tactics for use in such a course, suggested some ways to help instructors use one type of written assignment, and then gave us some very specific written assignments developed at their university. Their article serves well to guide our use of writing in the basic oral communication course. Beyond this more limited perspective is a vast national effort to persuade all teachers in all disciplines to become more proficient in the use of written exercises and to encourage a broader conception of literacy as an essential cornerstone of education. What follows references more directly this national context and urges all of us to

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accept this broadened perspective for all of our courses, not just the basic course.

A perennial complaint of many faculty is that students do not write well. If the attribution literature is correct, most of these faculty will probably blame someone other than themselves for this problem. An especially popular group to blame is our colleagues in English departments whose culpability often is captured in equally irrational claims: "They spend too much time teaching esoteric literature and not enough on teaching rhetorical skills" or perhaps more caustically "They try to teach creative writing before the students know the essentials of informative writing." Whatever the version you have heard, the simple upshot is they are not doing their job properly, and we are all suffering the consequences. Perhaps as a response to this interdisciplinary warfare, a fledgling movement emerged among teachers of rhetoric and those faculty who reasoned wisely that we are all at fault for the questionable literacy of our students. Especially during the late seventies and early eighties writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) became a major national effort to address these concerns. At universities throughout the country special writing centers were established and workshops to help all faculty better use written assignments became commonplace. Conventions of the Modern Language Association (MLA) became a popular forum for advancing this cause.

At many enlightened universities the central administration strongly endorsed the ideas of WAC, taking steps to encourage promised solutions. One of the co-authors remembers as a graduate teaching assistant receiving a widely distributed memorandum from the highest academic office of the university acknowledging that literacy was a joint responsibility of all teachers at the university and underscoring the importance of using his mandate to work on student writing skills in every course. Incidentally, he partially exonerated the English faculty from sole responsibility for the current state of student writing skills. Other administrators funded

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special centers, local faculty workshops, and faculty attendance at national workshops on the subject. From the wave of WAC activity came an extensive literature with innumerable constructive suggestions and the stimulus for some related "movements." Among the movements spawned are the languages across the curriculum which encourages foreign language acquisition in the treatment of other subject areas and communication across the curriculum which sometimes includes WAC and adds oral communication and media enhancement of pedagogical efforts. For a successful example of the former check with Dr. Wendy Allen and others at St. Olaf College, and for the latter consider the work of Dr. George Grice and others at Radford University.

During the eighties we also encountered increased concern for other general skills which students seriously needed. Among these were creative decision making and critical analysis skills, often lumped together into creative decision-making, but not necessarily. The convergence of these collective concerns led the Ford Foundation to encourage proposals for development in students of a broadened conception and improved skills of literacy. In early requests for proposals (RFPs) they provided a broad but eloquent definition which underscored the convergence of these general concerns and which provided a blueprint for the subsequent projects they supported: literacy, they defined, is "speaking with logic and force, writing with clarity and grace, analyzing with critical cogency, measuring ideas and events by values, and creating through imagination and synthesis." The co-authors of the present paper participated in one of these Ford Foundation Grants in which "reading and writing as empowering mental processes" was the primary focus. From this experience we offer some observations as a complement to the preceding article.

First, and very practically, the published literature on WAC and the expanded concepts of literacy are very broad, very rich, and ultimately very repetitive. We offer one specific

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source which we found especially useful: Lois Barry of Eastern Oregon State College prepared a relatively short booklet (65 pages) in which she offered *The Busy Professor's Travel Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum* (EOSC, 1984). Because she is strongly committed to the realization of her ideas and goals, she has a very liberal reproduction policy; so, any of us can use her work reasonably without problems. If you have trouble locating a copy, contact either of the co-authors, and we will share ours with you. From this most useful point of departure one can easily locate in the broader literature any special help you might need. This booklet was current at the time of the grant in which we participated and other more recent sources may be more readily available; but, whichever you choose, get one and save yourself the challenge of recreating the wheel.

Two serious sets of obstacles confound efforts to use writing in communication classes: one set derives from instructors and one set from students. Consider first the ways we obstruct our own efforts. The reasons faculty across all disciplines provide for not using more written assignments are remarkably similar and often reflect an unjustifiable recalcitrance. Presuming a general awareness of these reasons, we propose a few simple answers: If one will learn some of the options available, they will quickly discover that writing assignments do not necessarily increase the work load but instead can decrease instructor investment of time and energy. The skillful use of peer evaluations can reduce time expended and quickly evaluated short assignments can so increase the quality of longer assignments that the overall time expended is reduced, and instructional effectiveness increases. In more technically oriented courses where writing may be unexpected, such assignments can impose an alternative way of thinking about the activity and thereby enhance learning. The public speaking assignments of the preceding article and exercises for broadcasting classes, including the practicums and internships, are useful cases at point. Class

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size is often an obstacle, but short written assignments can be graded quickly and sub-group projects can reduce the magnitude of the task. To succeed with writing in the communication curriculum, we also need to train our teaching assistants to use these techniques from the beginning of their preparation as teachers. This places responsibility on the course coordinating faculty to help assistants learn to do so. Finally, we must recognize the limited knowledge of some faculty who do not wish to reveal their ignorance or ineptitude. We need to help them acquire a repertory of writing assignments and to try them. This may require strong encouragement from administrators but is possible when the advantages are shown and the ineffectiveness of some traditional approaches revealed. In a time when greater premiums are at stake for increased effectiveness of undergraduate instruction no one can afford to neglect such a powerful repertory of pedagogical techniques to enhance subject comprehension and general literacy.

The second set of obstacles comes from the students. Only last week at a selective admission small liberal arts and sciences university one of the co-authors had a student with roughly 1300 SAT scores tell him that the communication course (persuasion) was not an English course. Such a narrow minded attitude can be checked by instructor explanation at the beginning of the course and university-wide attention to the collective responsibility of all teachers for literacy skills. At this university the presence of a required writing workshop and a writing center operated by the English Department, no matter how effective, contributes to the perception that writing is a concern of only one part of any total curriculum. Students also do not understand the substantive relationship of the content and its form of expression. If we in communication are not teaching this essential relationship, then we are also missing a good opportunity to justify the study of communication as a substantive discipline, as well as to help encourage writing assignments as a useful pedagogical

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technique. Contrary to an inaccurate though widespread student viewpoint from the sixties, students really do not know exactly what they need to know. That is one reason why they or their parents or others pay us to teach them. Part of our responsibility is to help them realize how writing forces self examination, better critical analysis, and improved formulation of their thinking and ideas. With repetitious use of written assignments they come to realize the effect these techniques can have on their acquisition not only of our subject matter but their more general grasp of self and life as well.

Not the least of concern in this brief statement is the identification of assignments available. Barry's booklet and numerous other sources provide a wide array of prospects, and the preceding article identifies some of the informal and a few formal techniques. What we have found especially useful is the group development among teaching assistants and faculty of their exercises. Ask each person to identify the formal and informal writing techniques they use in one or more courses. Gather these ideas and then assign one or two people to each technique and have them develop a handout for each prospect parallel to the exercises in the prior article. In this fashion one can accumulate a useful set of locally generated products. From the broader literature compile a longer list and assign those unused locally for experimental use in different classes. Then arrange for the teachers to share their responses to the effectiveness and problems using each technique. If they work well, then develop them more thoroughly as suggested for the locally generated techniques. In this fashion one can create a socially reinforcing approach to the generation of a set of useful exercises. Sometimes the more staid faculty will be reluctant to try something different. Try to convince them it is their leadership responsibility to help the TAs and the junior faculty. This may permit them through involvement to persuade themselves.

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We are providing here only a general framework with somewhat vague guidance. We know the rich particulars are readily available elsewhere. If we can tease instructor interest to pursue these options, they will likely get into this general movement to enhance student literacy. In this addendum essay we have focused on writing assignments. With increased success with these assignments we believe instructors will expand into other dimensions of the broadened conception of literacy. Among the directions for extension are some rich lodes: We desperately need to teach our students how to read texts more effectively. One of the co-authors approaches course textbooks as a communication strategy exercise. In so doing the students learn to approach the text as a critical analyst operating at a meta-level where one outlines the chapters, asks why the author did this at that time or place, and how the effort relates to other parts of the text and to the course and its general subject matter. Other directions involve creative thinking. One co-author has a rather typical modeling paper assignment for the basic course, but the last part of the paper asks students to locate a far-fetched metaphor to capture some aspect of the communication process. Students love the challenge, and their explanations of spider webs, flowers, and DNA as analogies of communication reflect wonderful analysis. These examples merely scratch the surface of opportunity for us to enrich our potential instruction.

In retrospect we acknowledge the somewhat informal and speculative appearance of this complementary addendum to the preceding article. What we wanted to accomplish was acknowledgment of the rich and broader context of the writing exercises used in the basic course at University of Kansas. They are on the right track and doing so admirably. But much more is available. Our task was to share some of our reactions based on a Ford Foundation Literacy Grant which opened our eyes to the vast potential of our collective responsibility for improved education through a broader

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conception of literacy. We hope instructors will accept the challenge implicit in this short essay and begin to share their success with all of us who are collectively dedicated to a better world through communication education.